

Public and private use of open space in a densely urbanized context

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Introduction

The boundary between Flanders' urban and rural areas has faded throughout recent decades. What remains is a chaotic spatial structure without any real notion of centrality. The so-called 'open space', which is far from open nowadays, is evolving from an agricultural production area to a semi-urbanized consumption area where people reside and recreate. On the one hand, the public use of the open space seems to be growing, particularly because of the success of recreational networks. On the other hand, the open space also seems to be increasingly used in a private way, as a consequence of residential development, garden construction and the use of former pasture land to keep horses. Both transformations are rooted in deeper social evolutions of individualization, privatism and changing recreational needs. Because of Flanders' specific and dense urbanization pattern, assessing these transformations in a Flemish context can probably open a relevant research for similar contexts in North-West Europe or other urbanized regions in the world.

Methods

The public and private use of open space is operationalized through specific features to be examined. The most important feature of public use is the recreational use of open space with recreational networks, supported by infrastructure, as main elements. The major private features include rural housing, private gardens and horse pastures. It is however difficult to study these features in a temporal dimension since historical data are hard to find. Moreover the existing datasets often don't correspond to the situation on the ground.

Since no effective spatial datasets are available to study the features, a field study (in case areas of approximately 200 ha) was carried out in six municipalities with different spatial characteristics regarding their open space. All signs of public or private use were registered. Additionally, the local policy documents of the six municipalities were assessed on the policy options regarding these features.

Results

The extensive field study confirmed that open space is really becoming more public, even though not all areas in the same degree. Following conditions seem rather determining: the attractiveness of the landscape, the presence of forests and bodies of water, the recreational policy of the municipality, the accessibility and the distance to residential areas. At the same

time also the privatization of the open space is clearly becoming a reality. Its main determining conditions are the proximity of the built environment and the parcel size.

The evaluation of the local policy documents shows that it is not easy for municipal authorities to respond to these evolutions. Most municipalities pay some (passive) attention to the increasing recreational use of open space and sometimes develop specific programs within some spatial preconditions. Privatization, on the other hand, doesn't seem to be an issue for the municipalities at all.

The paper ends somewhat pessimistically. It seems quite impossible to stop these evolutions through (spatial) planning policy alone. Planning policy can only aim to guide these evolutions in the best way possible, considering the limiting carrying-capacity of open space. A better enforcement through the building permit system can be helpful in the short term.

Further questions

The two transformations often take place in the same area, but it is not yet clear whether or not this generates conflicts. Further research, among others through the interview of users, is necessary to give an adequate answer. Also more evidence is needed to talk of a real evolutionary transformation, since the current analysis is rather static.

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